



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"Journey Through Prayer" - Real Faith for Real People Series

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Good morning! I'm Chris Pan and am on staff at the church as the Executive Director. Thank you for allowing me the privilege to serve you and this church. I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak today.

We are continuing in our "Real Faith for Real People" sermon series, where we are examining the book of James in the Bible. James wants his readers to mature in their faith, and in our passage today, he gives some very practical advice on prayer. And so we're going to have a very practical sermon on prayer.

Our verses today are from James 5: 13-18 - **13** *Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.* **14** *Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.* **15** *The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.* **16** *Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.* **17** *Elijah was a person just like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.* **18** *Then he prayed again, and*

the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

This is the Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God!

I gotta tell you the truth, right up front, I'm not very good at prayer. It is easier for me to be a do-er than a pray-er. But last year, I heard a man named Pete Grieg speak about prayer at the Hawaiian Island Ministries Conference, and it set me on a journey of expanding my definition of prayer and what it means to be a person of prayer.

James reassures me, and reassures us in this passage that Elijah, this great prophet from the Old Testament who prayed and started and stopped a drought, was a person just like us. So let's start by being clear: Prayer is not something reserved for monks, and nuns, and super spiritual people, and members of the prayer team. Prayer is for people just like us—people who may not be that good at prayer.

Here's what I'm learning. Prayer is a living conversation, and it is more than just talking. Prayer is mindfully responding to God's presence. Prayer is mindfully responding to God's presence in the everyday things of life. The journey of prayer, moves us to where we:

- 1. Talk at God**
- 2. Talk to God**
- 3. Listen to God**
- 4. Be with God.**

Let's go on the journey together. We'll talk about each step today, and actually pray. Because the best way to grow in prayer, isn't to listen to me talk about prayer, but to actually pray. One word from God is worth 1,000 sermons. And if I'm preaching, one word from God is worth a million sermons! So, let's start by praying. Will you join me in prayer?

God, we do ask for just one word from You, to each of us. May I be small and may Your voice come through. Teach us to pray. May we draw near to You now. May we hear You, may we recognize Your voice. May we be mindfully aware of Your presence. May we enjoy Your presence today, and may we have some fun. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

Step One of the Journey:

- 1. Talk At God**

When I was a kid, I had this recurring nightmare that there was an iguana was in my house. Actually, it wasn't even my house—I was just in a house, with an iguana, and the TV set was on, and for some reason, I had to jump over the iguana.

And as I would jump over the iguana, it would turn its head up and try to bite me. And I would wake up, terrified. I had this nightmare over and over again. So I starting praying every night as I lay in bed: "Dear God, please don't let me have nightmares. Please please please please please please please please please please." And I would go on, until I fell asleep. "Please please please..."

Did God want to hear my prayer? Absolutely! Our passage today says, "Are any among you suffering? They should pray!"

Jesus, teaching on the Sermon on the Mount, says this: ⁷ "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you... ¹¹ If you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" - Matthew 7:7, 11

God wants to hear from you. He is a Father in heaven who is waiting to give good things to those who ask him. This is where we all start our journey of prayer. We ask God.

But, if I had to critique the prayer of my six-year old self, here's another practical tip from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount:

"And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him." Matthew 6:7-8

So, we're getting to the interactive part of the sermon now. This will be like Biology LAB. In my Biology class,

my teacher lectured about frog anatomy and I studied the textbook about frog anatomy, but I really learned about frog anatomy when we had Bio LAB and I got to dissect a frog.

So we're going to dissect the frog. Instead of just listening to me speaking about prayer, we're going to pray! I'm going to pause—for less than 30 seconds—so don't babble! Are any among you suffering? Pray. God may not remove the suffering, but he can transform it. If you prefer, you can close your eyes now. Be honest and ask your Father in heaven for good things now. [30 seconds – Moment of Prayer]

God, may it be so.

Everyone still here? Good, let's keep going on our journey. As we read, the Bible says, "Ask God!" But this is just the first step in the journey of prayer and only one type of prayer. The problem is, many of us never keep going on the journey. We keep praying prayers that are just, "Please please please please please please please please..."

Pete Grieg says this: "The Bible says to pray at all times with all kinds of prayers. But a lot of people think that prayer is just one thing. That's like going to a buffet and only ever eating one item. You'll get sick. You need a huge variety in order to stay healthy. Prayer is a menu, not a dish. So much of the Christian prayer life consists of asking God for things. So what are we going to pray about when there's no more pain and sin and suffering?"

In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had no needs. When God's

kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven, we'll have everything we need. What will we talk to God about then? God is more than a vending machine. We were created to walk and talk and be with God. Prayer isn't just a way to tell God our problems – He already knows them. We were created to be with our Father.

The next step on the journey is:
Step 2: Talk to God.

When you have a relationship with someone, you do more than ask for things. You tell them about your whole life. Our passage today says: Are you cheerful? Then sing a song of praise! Have you sinned? Confess. Are you thankful? Say thank you! Pray for the healing of someone else.

Time for a Practical tip: For the last year, I have been using a very helpful app on my smartphone call Pray As You Go. It is free, on iPhones and Android. You can also access it from a computer. It's a daily ten-minute guided prayer session that you can listen to, as you go: It starts with a little music, then there's a short passage from the Bible, and then it gives some questions that prompts your conversation with God.

There are questions like, "Can you turn to Jesus in prayer and see in Him your wisest and firmest friend?" and "Talk with Jesus about your relationship with him and the difference it makes in your life."

One warning: the app is run by Jesuits in Britain. So, it's Catholics and narrators who speak with British accents. Just in case either of those things freak you out.

Time for LAB: Again, let's take less than 30 seconds now to pause and pray. And we'll answer one of the questions from Pray As You Go: "Speak to God about whatever you notice in your heart now." [30 seconds – Moment for Prayer]

God, may it be so.

Let's keep going on our journey. As we think about talking to God there is an individual component, but as our passage points out, there is also a community component to prayer as well.

James writes about praying for healing by the elders, confessing to each other, and praying for one another so that you may be healed. Our church takes these verses seriously. We actually think it means what it says, so we actually do it. "Pray for one another, so that you may be healed."

One of the essential elements of the Rooted Small Groups that more than 200 people are involved with now is praying for one another, so that we may be healed.

And of course, we have regular Healing Services. We had one just last week, where almost 200 people came to receive prayer, and more than 50 people came to pray for them. If you've never been, you might be scared that it will be weird. I share your fear! I'm also scared of it being weird.

Let me assure you, it's not weird. It may be a bit different from what you are used to, but it is a great time of lifting up the concerns of one another to a God that cares and heals.

I wanted to share just two of the many comments that we receive after the Healing services.

First comment: "I asked for prayer for the pain in my arms because I broke them a while ago. I felt immediate warmth flow in my arms and relief of the pain and I felt inner peace."

Second comment: "When they were praying for me I had my head bowed and eyes closed while the two prayer counselors had their hands on my shoulders. Then I felt a hand physically touching me on my heart and warmth and tingling went through my body. I opened my eyes to see who was touching me but there wasn't any hand I could see. I felt love, closer to God and it changed my perspective on organized religion. It's removed my skepticism and increased my faith that God really hears my prayers."

It is a blessing not just to receive prayer, but to pray for others. Every time I go to the healing service to pray for people, it is an incredible experience, feeling the closeness of God.

Time for LAB! Don't worry, we're not going to do it now. But at the end of every service, we have people up front who will pray for you. If you want to receive prayer, please come up. And if you want to pray for others, also come up.

The qualifications to pray for someone else is: (1) Do you believe in Jesus? (2) Do you have a pulse?

If you answered yes to both questions, congratulations! You are qualified to pray for someone else!

The next Step on our Journey through Prayer is: **3. Listen to God.**

The comedienne Lily Tomlin once asked, "Why is that when we talk to God its called praying, but when God talks to us, its called schizophrenia."

Let's talk about listening to God, because it is not crazy. And our task, as we grow in prayer and as followers of Jesus, is to recognize God's voice and obey. Recognize God's voice and obey.

Jesus is a good shepherd, and we are His sheep. In the gospel of John, Jesus says: "*The sheep hear the Shepherd's voice. He calls His own sheep by name and leads them out. When He has brought out all His own, He goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow Him because they know His voice...My sheep hear My voice. I know them, and they follow Me.*" John 10:3b, 4, 27)

Do we know the voice of the Shepherd? Do we recognize His voice?

God will speak to us in a variety of ways. Through the Bible; through impressions and thoughts and feelings; through common sense and the wise counsel of others; through circumstantial signs.

I have a hard time with this, so let me share with you just one piece of practical advice that I received this past year. If you have a car, when you are in the car, turn off the car radio. We have so little silence in our lives.

We need to create the space and silence in our lives where we can hear God. If you don't have a car, maybe it's put your phone down, or take your headphones out.

Sitting in silence is might be incredibly awkward. When I first started doing this, I kept reaching over to turn on the radio every three minutes. But create that space, and God will show up.

Another practical tip: If you experience God when you are surfing, go surfing! If you experience God when you are hiking, go hiking! If you experience God when gardening, or serving the houseless, or volunteering with children in need...do those things! It doesn't always have to be sitting in silence.

As I've been learning to recognize God's voice, I realize that often times when I sense God speaking, He is telling me to step outside of myself to show His love to others.

I'll tell you two stories about my continuing journey of trying to recognize and obey God's voice.

Last year, I was at a birthday party for one of my kids' friends. It was at the beach. We had a pop-up tent down by the water. A big rainstorm came through, and it started pouring! Everyone ran for cover further back, leaving me at the tent. But I'm an introvert, so I was grateful for the quiet. I stared at the ocean and enjoyed that time of quiet.

A woman came walking by, getting soaked by the rain. I could have let her walk by but I asked, "Would you like some cover?" And she came and sat and was watching a kid play in the surf. So I asked, "Is he related to you?" And she said, "Yes, that's my grandson. His mother, my daughter, just died."

And it turns out that this woman's daughter had died just a few days before. They hadn't had services yet. They hadn't done anything yet. So I

got to talk to her for a while, just listen to her pain, and I had this sense, I should offer to pray for her. And I don't want to pray for her! You know...it's weird.

My wife is really good at this. She'll just ask, "Can I pray for you?" And people will be like "Sure!" and it's great. But I had never done that in my life. But I had this sense, I should offer to pray for her. So, I said...nothing. We just kept talking. And eventually the storm passed, everyone came back to the beach, and she went off to take care of her grandkid. That's me...learning to recognize God's voice and obey.

We left the party a few hours later, and on our way out, the woman and her grandson were sitting on some picnic benches on the side. And I got that sense again to go offer to pray for her. So I did this [Walking back and forth, wrestling with indecision]. And I finally walked over and said: "It was great to speak with you...if you're interested in church, we're at the Ko'olau Golf Course." And I ran off.

Recognizing God's voice is one thing. Obeying is something else. And Elijah was a person just like us. We're on this journey. And sometimes we'll get it right, and sometimes we won't.

A week later, I was on a plane flying to our Presbytery meeting in the Bay Area. Again, I'm an introvert. I've got my book, I'm getting ready for some "me" time.

And a woman sits next to me. So, I try to be polite, give her a half-hearted smile, and try to get the conversation over early so I can read my book.

I ask, "Are you flying up for fun or for work?" And she says, um, neither. "It's medical." And I'm like, "Aw man." I put my book down. She says, "My 20 year son just got diagnosed with a brain tumor, and we're flying up for surgery." They got these last minute flights, she was next to me, her husband was at the back of the plane, and her son was a bunch of rows ahead of us.

We talked and I got that same feeling—that I should offer to pray for her. And I thought, it's five-hour flight. I can offer to pray for her at about four hours and 45 minutes into the flight. You know, I don't want to pray for her and then be stuck next to her for the rest of the flight, right? That's weird. I'll do it at the end of the flight. We talk some more, half an hour goes by, she's up checking on her son, checking in with her husband. She sits back down. And I get this sense, offer to pray for her *right now*. Aw, man. So I say to the woman, "Can I pray for you and your son?" She says, "Okay."

So I pray this simple prayer. "God. You love this woman. You love her son. Heal him. Be with him through surgery. Make yourself known to them and comfort them. In Jesus' name, Amen." That's it...like ten seconds.

I open my eyes, and she's sobbing. Tears are streaming down her face. And I realize, this isn't just a blessing for her, it's a blessing for me. This opportunity, this privilege to lift her and her son into the presence of God. God loves them so much, and He used me to tell them.

It's a journey—learning how to recognize, learning how to obey.

Sometimes you get it right, sometimes you don't. And if you get it wrong, maybe you get a little embarrassed. But when you get it right, someone gets blessed. And that someone might be you.

She's crying, she's sobbing and she says, "I knew it! I knew it! I told my husband, "I think I'm sitting next to a pastor. It's going to be okay. It's going to be okay."

Time for LAB: Time to listen to and recognize God's voice. For the next few seconds, just listen for and listen to God's voice. [30 seconds – *Moment of Prayer*]

The last step in our journey:

4. Be with God

I bought a hammock last year. And I love being in the hammock. And whenever I'm in the hammock, inevitably, one or both of my kids will climb into the hammock with me. And we'll just hang out in the hammock. And my kids don't always want to talk to me, or listen to me, but they want to be with me in that hammock. Eventually, they may ask me for food, or the iPad, or tell me about their day, or I'll tell them about my day, but that's not the primary reason they're in the hammock. They're in the hammock to just be with me, to be in their dad's presence. And, if you didn't catch it, that is a metaphor for prayer.

A writer has said, "Lots of religions pray. The difference for Christians is that when we pray, we are climbing into our Father's lap." That's the journey though prayer. We start with prayer that is just asking for things, and we mature to where we know that we are climbing into our Father's lap.

Can we talk about Elijah and rain for just a few moments?

James says, "*Elijah was a person just like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.*"

As you may know, we operated a golf course last year. So I was particularly interested in Elijah praying that it might not rain because last year I also prayed that it might not rain. And it rained. And rained record amounts! And if you have ever had a BBQ or beach day or just washed your car, you might also be interested in Elijah's prayer that stopped the rain.

It's in Old Testament of the Bible, in the book 1 Kings, Chapter 17, verse 1. "*Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, 'As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.'*"

What? That's a statement, not a prayer. Where's the prayer? I thought there would be lots of "O God" and "Thou art's"! "Lord you control the heavenly plumbing!" Nope. Check it out yourself. There are no recorded words to the prayer at all...because the Jewish attitude of prayer was "standing before God."

So that simple phrase, BEFORE WHOM I STAND, was enough indication to James and other Jewish rabbis that the drought was a result of the prayers of Elijah.

"BEFORE WHOM I STAND". Standing in the presence of the living God—mindfully responding to God's presence.

When Elijah prayed for the rain to come back 3 1/2 years later, it's in 1 Kings 18:42: "*Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; there he bowed himself down upon the earth and put his face between his knees.*"

Again. No words. Just Elijah, mindfully responding to and being in God's presence.

Pete Grieg says we will grow the most when we stop praying for the big things occasionally, but pray for the trivial things continually.

I used to think of prayer as taking some time out of my day to pray, maybe ten minutes or an hour, to pray, and praying through my list of prayer requests. And then I would go back and live the other 23 hours of my life. But now, I think of taking those ten minutes, or that hour, out of my day to recenter my life on Jesus—so that I can spend the other 23 hours of the day in continual prayer, standing in God's presence, sitting in my Father's lap.

One final Pete Grieg story that I love. Pete is walking down the street and he hears God say to him, "Look at that tree." So Pete freezes in the middle of the street, and thinks, "This is it. This is my burning bush moment like Moses. God's going to appear in flames! Or, the tree is going to collapse, and I'm going to have to save someone's life."

And he's staring at this tree for like five minutes, and people are going by thinking, "What's going on with this guy?"

And after a while Pete's says, "God, I'm looking at the tree. Show me! What is it about the tree?"

I'm looking at the tree!" And Pete hears God say, "Man, you are so intense. I just thought it was a good tree."

I love that story, because that's the intimacy with God that I want in my life. That's the being with God that I would like to grow into. God, that is a nice tree.

Final LAB assignment. Again if you are interested in receiving prayer or praying for someone else, please come up at the end of the service. But, for everyone, here's the final lab assignment. We live in the most beautiful place in the world. And this week, you'll see some beautiful trees. When you walk out those doors, you'll see some beautiful trees. And when you, do, mindfully respond to God's presence and say, "God, that's a nice tree."

May it be so. Let's pray.

God, we love You. And You love us. We are on a journey with You, growing in maturity, and in prayer. You are a good Father, so we ask that You help us on the next step in our journey. Help us to talk to You, listen to You, and to be with You. God, may it be so. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com